THE SENTINEL

The Preservation of the Beaver in Norway.

R. Lydekker, B. A. Cantab., F. R. S., in "Knowledge."

Had not the use of its hair in manufacture of hats been superseded by that of silk, there is little doubt that the beaver, both in the Old World and in America, would by this time been numbered among extinct animals. As it is, the creature has but a hard time of it at the best, for although there is no longer a demand for its hair by the hat manufacturer, yet beaver fur is an article highly valued by the furrier, and equally highly esteemed by the fair sex. Although a few survive in the Rhone and Rhine, while more numerous colonies are found in parts of Russia, the beaver has been practically swept away from most European countries, though place names frequently bear testimony to its former presence. Among the countries where it still maintains a foothold is Norway, but of late years little information has been forthcoming as to the approximate number of beavers in the country, or their mode of life.

The Norwegian beaver began to decrease in numbers from the early part or middle of last century, and by 1800 had disappeared from most parts of the country, with the exception of the northern districts of Finmark and Nordland, and the southern province of Nedenas, or Christiansand. The work of extermination went on more or less rapidly till the year 1845, when it was somewhat checked by the enactment of protective statutes; but either these could not have worked very effectually, or the war of extermination had been only too well carried out, for in 1880 the number of individuals surviving throughout the country was estimated at only about three score. Three years later the number of head was put down roughly at a hundred, and since that date it is probable that the number has been fully maintained, if, indeed, it has not actually increased.

The statutes which have been enacted for the preservation of the beaver in Norway are not, for the most part, of a very effectual nature, and have decidedly feudatory smack. The statute of 1845 provided that no beaver at all should be killed for ten years, and then only by the proprietors of the estates on which they are found. This was admirable as far as it went, but as from the beginning of 1856 proprietors were again allowed to kill, without either restriction as to time or number, it is obvious that the good results of the first enactment might very well have been speedily lost. Probably this was found to be the case, as in 1863 a fresh statute was propounded, establishing a close time and fixing a limitation in number. According to this statute, beaver were only allowed to be killed during the months of August, September and October, and then only by owners of estates, who were permitted to kill but one individual annually to each separate estate. Two much more effectual statutes have, however, recently come into operation: the one dated August 31, 1894, protecting all the Amt of Sondre ...nd of 1904, and ...ember 3, 1895, ... the colony of ...f 1905. The ... killing beaver ...tronors (about ... be inflicted on ...rticipators in the offence.

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...ws are the first refuges formed by the beaver when taking possession of a fresh spot, and they may accordingly be likened to the rude sheds erected by workmen employed on building a mansion. Probably each lodge is tenanted only by a single couple and their young family; the young beavers, when able to do without parental assistance, either settling down temporarily in burrows in the immediate neighborhood, or wander away to form new colonies. Small lodges constructed in a kind of ferry building fashion appear to be run up by bachelor beavers who have not yet ventured to take upon themselves the responsibilities of a wife and family. There may, however, be also spinster beavers to whom such accommodation is also necessary—it is to be hoped only temporarily. Dams are constructed where beavers have quartered themselves by the sides of gently flowing streamlets, or small posts through which a current runs, in order to obtain water of sufficient depth and maintaining a constant level. The "bund" is substantially built and difficult to demolish. One examined in 1895 was constructed at the outflow of a small stream through a forest marsh; and where there was formerly but a small shallow pool, a pond or lake of some hundred yards in diameter soon resulted from the labors of these indefatigable rodents. The "bund," which was about fifteen feet in length, with a cross section of some two feet, was entirely made in the course of three weeks during the summer of 1890. In Canada, when the dam is sufficiently stout, the pool will eventually silt up and form a "beaver meadow," but Mr. Collett does not record any of these "meadows" in Norway. During the cold winter months the beavers, although not hibernating in the proper sense of the term, pass what appears a somewhat dull existence in the central chamber of the lodge, the roof of which for most of the time is buried in snow. Sometimes, however, when the weather is mild for the season, and an unusually cold autumn prevented the completion of annual repairs at the proper time, the beavers will venture out from their retirement for a short period in order to remedy such dilapidations as stand in urgent need of immediate attention. When they have been engaged on such work their footprints are visible in the snow. Immediately after the breaking up of the ice in spring the animals issue forth to procure a fresh supply of food and resume their daily avocations.

The young beavers are born in April or May, three being apparently a common number in a litter. At first their eyes are closed, but they grow rapidly, and by September or October are about the size of a cat. When able to shift for themselves they leave the parental lodge, and frequently start off to found a family in some fresh locality, although sometimes they set off on their wanderings alone. Following the courses of small streams, they frequently tack straight across the open mountain slopes for many miles, so that one or more not unfrequently make their appearance in valleys where none have been known for years. They will even occasionally cross small arms of the sea; and the perils of the journey end in death to no inconsiderable number. Several old time superstitions still cling round the beaver. One of the most persistent and most incorrect is that the flat scaly tail is employed as a trowel for plastering down the mud during building operations. Another is that the secretion of the tail glands—the *castoreum* of the old pharmacopœia—has the property of frightening away whales or porpoises when approaching a boat! Still more strange is the old idea that some individuals were compelled to lie on their backs and be ladened with building materials, when they were dragged by their companions to the scene of operations. Probably this fable originated from the circumstance that many individuals have the hair worn off the back from constantly passing up and down the narrow burrow or entrance to a lodge.

Family Vengeance.

In the year 1774 or 1775 some persons arrived late one evening at Strasburg from the German side of the Rhine, and proceeded to the house of the *bourreau*, or public executioner. They called upon him to accompany them instantly out of the town, as his services were required for the decapitation of a criminal of rank. They instructed him to bring with him the heavy two-edged sword with which he was accustomed, in the regular discharge of his functions, to behead malefactors, and added that as he would have to make a rather long journey, he should receive a handsome fee for his services. The headsman at once agreed to accompany the strangers, who showed him into a carriage, which drove him across the river to Kehl. Arrived there, his companions told him that he must consent to be blindfolded. This was done, and after a journey of nearly two days the party arrived at a moated castle, of which the drawbridge, as the executioner could hear, had to be lowered to admit them. The headsman was led into a small apartment, where the bandage was removed from his eyes; and after waiting here for some time, he was conducted into the great hall of the castle, where stood a scaffold hung with black cloth, and in the middle of it a chair or stool. A female was shortly afterwards led in by two persons; she was dressed in deep mourning, and her face wholly concealed by a thick veil She was seated in the chair, and her attendants proceeded to tie her hands behind her, and afterwards to bind her legs to the chair. Not a word was spoken by the people who bound her, and she herself neither made complaint nor offered resistance. When all the preparations were completed, the headsman, standing behind the victim, at a signal drew the great sword he carried. One of the attendants grasped the victim's hair, and forcibly raised her head by it, and then, at a single stroke, the head was severed from the body. The executioner was liberally rewarded, blindfolded again, and conducted back to Kehl. Arrived there, he was set down at the end of the bridge leading to Strasburg.

Wraxall adds that he often, during his residence in Germany, heard discussions as to the identity of the lady who thus suffered; and the general belief was that she was Augusta Elizabeth, daughter of Prince Charles Alexander of Wurtemburg, and wife of the Prince of Turn and Taxis. She was a woman of very violent passions; she detested her husband, and it was known that she had repeatedly attempted his life. About the year 1773 or 1774 they were finally separated, and she was taken into the custody of her brother, the then reigning Duke of Wurtemberg, who immured her in one of his castles. She was never seen again in public, and there is at least the possibility that it was her head which fell under the sword of the *bourreau* of Strasburg.

AVOIDING A THUNDERSTORM.—On the approach of a thunderstorm French peasants often make up a very smoky fire, says *Industries and Iron*, in the belief that safety from lightning is thus assured. By some this is deemed a superstition, but Schuster shows that the custom is based on reason, inasmuch as the smoke acts as a good conductor for carrying away the electricity slowly and safely. He points out that in 1,000 cases of damage by lightning 6.3 churches and 8.5 mills have been struck, while the number of factory chimneys has only been 0.3.

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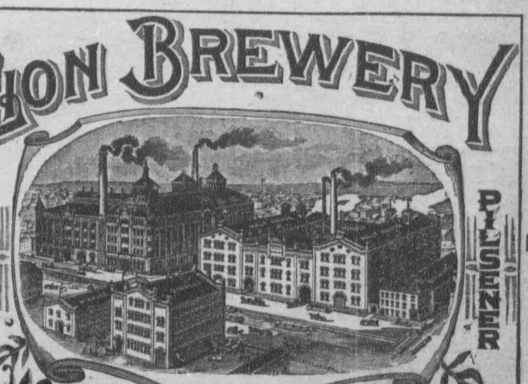
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